The Migration Industry and Future Directions for Migration Policy

Abstract: International migration has become commercialized in both control and facilitation functions. This significantly shapes current migration flows and should prompt governments to reassess migration policies. From the rapid growth of specialized transportation and labour migration companies, to multinational companies managing detention centres or establishing border security, to the organized criminal networks profiting from human smuggling and trafficking, we are currently witnessing a growing commercialization of international migration. The paper addresses the questions prompted by these developments and offers new concepts and theory for their further study.

Migration has become business, big business. Over the last few decades a host of new opportunities have emerged that capitalize on migrants’ desire to move as well as on governments’ attempts to manage migratory flows. Specialized transportation companies, visa facilitation agencies, labor recruiters, security contractors, human smugglers and NGOs – across the globe we are witnessing a wide assembly of actors whose existence depends on money paid to either facilitate or constrain migration mobility. The businesses involved in this migration industry range from small migrant entrepreneurs using their own experience to assist others making the journey, to big multinational companies who compete in the booming market of government contracts to carry out migration management. The commercialization of international migration is evident at every step of the migratory process and takes place in virtually every country of emigration, transit and immigration. As such, the migration industry is not only an important phenomenon in and of itself, it also fundamentally impacts migratory flows and governments’ attempts to manage or regulate migration.
The migration industry

The commercialization of international migration means that it has become impossible to speak of human mobility without also speaking of the migration industry. Yet, acknowledging the role that the migration industry plays prompts a number of questions that have so far received only limited attention. What determines the emergence and disappearance of particular markets and migration industry actors? What is the impact of different parts of the migration industry on migration patterns and networks? And what is the significance of the migration industry in regard to government policies and attempts to regulate migration?

Understanding the dynamics at play is by no means straightforward and the different components of the migration industry equally create complex interplays. An increasing number of businesses are working to secure both highly-skilled and unskilled migrants access to travel and work abroad. At the other end of the spectrum private security companies and airlines are key actors in manning border checkpoints and preventing unwanted migrants from entering. Yet, the facilitation industry and the control industry are interlinked as tightened immigration policies and hardened migration control are likely to drive up the profitability of human smuggling and of corruption among border guards and agencies with the know-how to ensure visas or other means of legal migration.

What’s old, what’s new?

The migration industry as such is not a new phenomenon. For centuries migrants have encountered both facilitation and control actors as well as exploiters and rescuers during their voyage. However, today’s migration industry has become more deeply embedded in the
current migration regimes in several ways. Social networks and transnational linkages mean that the contemporary migration industry inevitably emerges as part of any established migratory movement. At the same time complex immigration legislation, barriers to legal immigration and restrictive asylum policies continue to fuel both agencies facilitating legal immigration and human smugglers. In addition, the pervasiveness of neoliberal governance has resulted in outsourcing and privatization of anything from guest worker schemes to running asylum centers and carrying out of forced deportations to NGOs and private contractors. In several ways governments thus actively sustain and fund large parts of the migration industry.

**Multiple actors**

Scholars and policy makers have for quite some time acknowledged the existence of the migration industry, but mainly focused on the part that facilitates migration – in particular irregular migration. These include labor recruiters and contractors, money lenders, travel agents, transportation providers, legitimate and false paper providers, smugglers, formal and informal remittance and courier service owners, and lawyers and notaries involved in legal and paralegal counseling. All offer services for profit and are routinely regarded as actors disturbing orderly migration management.

However, other migration industry actors work in very close connection with governments actively outsourcing migration management functions and may be linked to functions carried out entirely within one country, such as operating detention centers. In addition, yet other non-state actors may become involved in the migration industry for reasons other than (solely) financial gain. A growing number of NGOs, social movements, faith-based organizations and migrant networks may thus be seen to engage in what has been termed “the
rescue industry”, e.g. running “information centers” focusing on the risks involved in irregular migration, philanthropy and social projects rescuing trafficked women and minors, providing religious sanctuary or taking out government contracts to run asylum centers or provide counseling to deportees. Putting all this together suggests that the migration industry includes a wide array of non-state actors who provide services that may both facilitate and constrain international migration.

**Multiple roles**

Secondly, it is important to appreciate the continued link between the migration industry and government policies. While some actors, e.g. transportation companies or human smugglers, appear to operate entirely independent of government involvement, statist structures such as immigration policies, labor market regulation, visa requirements, border control etcetera almost always remain an essential backdrop for understanding how these migration industry actors emerge and function.

The essential role of the state becomes even more visible when considering cases where labor immigration agencies are organized as quasi-governmental agencies or operate under government licenses. Last but not least, the use of private security companies, contractors and NGOs to carry out anything from border security to running asylum centers not only significantly blurs the line between public and private but also raises a number of questions as to the impact of the migration industry on government policies through knowledge, standard-setting, lobbying and lock-in effects. The pervasiveness of the migration industry, from contractors to entrepreneurs, both formal and informal, may thus well end up fundamentally reshaping global migration governance.
The migration industry and markets

Finally, the migration industry should be seen in the wider political economy shaping both migratory patterns and government responses. The privatization of migration management is intimately related both to the politicization of immigration and to the governmental paradigm of new public management. Labor immigration agencies tend to operate in larger frameworks of labor market policies and economic structures. Even the informal migration industry tends to be closely linked to legal and political structures in the countries of destination and origin. Understanding the migration industry thus requires a concurrent understanding of the growing commercialization of international migration and what may be seen as a set of emerging “markets for migration management” in which the migration industry operates.

Conclusion

From individual migrant entrepreneurs to international organizations, migration industry actors are exercising influence and authority at all levels of the migratory process. The migration industry in all its guises is here to stay. Yet, so far this fundamental commercialization of migration has received relatively little attention by policy-makers. However, as the migration industry significantly shapes migration flows it ought to prompt governments to reassess migration policies in terms of both how to intervene and which interlocutors to address in any attempt to manage migration.

At the practical level, taking account of the migration industry is likely to mean reorienting and adjusting policies in a range of areas. This may include forging closer cooperation with migration industry actors to ensure more orderly access for different kinds of labor migrants. It may include targeting humanitarian or development assistance to vulnerable migrant groups and/or communities with high out-migration rates. It means more carefully regulating
the current outsourcing of migration functions to avoid a democratic deficit and accountability gap. And it means better understanding the current market for irregular migration in order to combat exploitation and corruption.

Recommendations:

1. Understanding current migration flows demands an understanding of the current commercialization of all forms of international migration and the new business opportunities that constitute the migration industry.

2. Governments should realize the unintended consequences of current immigration and border policies in terms of sustaining and nurturing parts of the migration industry.

3. Governments must carefully regulate the outsourcing of migration functions to ensure migrants’ rights and avoid a democratic deficit.

4. A distinction between migration industry actors and migrants must be upheld when addressing migration-security concerns to avoid the criminalization of international migrants and asylum-seekers moving irregularly.